

# Fighting in the marketplace: warriors as traders in the *Iliad*

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Although Homer's poems are important sources for our knowledge of ancient political and cultural institutions, the poet often presents these in a state of flux. One instance of this is in the economic sphere. Warriors are typically presented as increasing their wealth through the acquisition of war prizes and by receiving gifts through bonds of guest-friendship; however, a striking passage in the sixth book of the *Iliad* shows Diomedes rejecting these institutions and instead profiting from Glaucus by a calculating exchange of their weapons, in a manner that anticipates modern ideas about market rationality.

## The whites of their eyes

The ability to drop bombs from planes allows the modern combatant to distance himself from the ravages of war. When an entire village of civilians is wiped out due to a misfire, it is, in the bureaucratic-speak of modern warfare, merely 'collateral damage'. In contrast, the ancient warrior, fighting hand-to-hand with his opponent, has no choice but to confront his enemy directly. His honour demands that he show that he is the greater warrior, but he can only achieve this by his indifference to the pain that he both inflicts and witnesses. He must be deaf to the enemy's shrill cries, blind to the writhing of his limbs, and unscathed by his blood as it spatters across battle lines. Staring into the eyes of the enemy, wrath must exceed sympathy; yet the battlefield similarly affords the warrior a unique vantage from which to recognize that the enemy possesses a common essence beneath his battle gear.

Homer's *Iliad* reveals the entire range of our humanity, as warriors show themselves to be, at one pole, more than mortal in their willingness to lose their lives for the sake of winning immortal fame and, at the other, bestial (as exemplified in Achilles' unforgiving wrath in response to his fallen friend Patroclus). In the midst of these extreme forms of behaviour, the poet is constantly reminding us of the warriors' mere humanity. The most obvious example of this comes in the form of the words

that are exchanged between enemy combatants before crossing swords. Although these interactions do not typically temper the blows that follow, one notable conversation in which combatants realize that they are bound to one another by an ancient bond of guest-friendship results in them laying down their weapons. Their armistice is, unfortunately, not long-lasting; however, the battle that ensues is waged on a quite different front as the poet anticipates the transition to a new epoch in which warriors become traders wrangling in the marketplace.

## Fighting words

It is certainly not out of love for his fellow man that Diomedes initiates dialogue with Glaucus, his Trojan rival, in book six:

*Who among mortal men are you,  
good friend? Since never  
before have I seen you in the fighting  
where men win glory,  
yet now you have come striding  
far out in front of all others  
in your great heart, who have  
dared stand up to my spear far-  
shadowing.*

Having first paid his respects to Glaucus for his courage to take him on, Diomedes makes it quite clear that he is up for the challenge:

*If you are one of those mortals  
who eat what the soil yields, come*

*nearer, so that sooner you may  
reach your appointed destruction...*

In light of Diomedes' intentions, his desire to know the details of Glaucus' life and lineage seems particularly strange. Why in the world would you want to humanize the man you are about to kill, by learning details about his life?

Although such exchanges might seem odd to the modern reader, Diomedes' question makes perfect sense when contextualized within the heroic code of honour. In this system, a man's merit could be measured by his stock of war prizes – and there is clearly much more to be gained by killing a man of high station than a mere foot soldier. The warrior who slays a combatant of nobility increases his status by acquiring the possessions of his vanquished rival and magnifies his fame through the exploits of his conquest.

Initially, Glaucus resists sharing the details of his life, offering instead a poetic statement about the meaninglessness of all human endeavours:

*High-hearted son of Tydeus, why  
ask of my generation?  
As is the generation of leaves, so  
is that of humanity.  
The wind scatters the leaves on the  
ground, but the live timber  
burgeons with leaves again in the  
season of spring returning.  
So one generation of men will  
grow while another dies.*

Are men's lives truly as characterless and insignificant as leaves blown in the wind? The warrior fights with valour precisely so that he will be remembered and overcome his transience in this world by the immortal fame of his battle prowess, but clearly the futility of the war effort is felt by more combatants than just Achilles. Ironically, the poetry of Glaucus' winged words reveals that man's consciousness of his death necessarily shows him to be undeniably different from the natural world in which his rotting flesh will return.

## Guest-friends and gifts

In spite of his deep sense of futility, Glaucus indulges Diomedes with a detailed account of his lineage that elicits a most unexpected response: it turns out that these enemy combatants are bound together through the tradition of hospitality. The belligerent Diomedes is quickly transformed (at least so it seems at first) with the prospect of renewing the bond of guest-friendship with Glaucus that was established by their ancestors:

*and Diomedes of the great war cry  
was gladdened.*

*He drove his spear deep into the  
prospering earth, and in winning  
words of friendliness he spoke to  
the shepherd of the people:*

*'See now, you are my guest-friend  
from far in the time of our fathers'.*

Diomedes continues with an accounting of the gifts that changed hands between their ancestors; for just as the prizes of war testify to one's defeat of the vanquished, gifts are a continuing reminder of the bond of friendship between donor and recipient:

*'Brilliant Oeneus once was host to  
Bellerophon  
the blameless, in his halls, and  
twenty days he detained him,  
and these two gave to each other  
fine gifts in token of friendship.  
Oeneus gave his guest a war belt  
bright with the red dye,  
Bellerophon a golden and double-  
handled drinking-cup,  
a thing I left behind in my house  
when I came on my journey.'*

The warrior may be unforgiving to those who have dishonoured his family and his people, yet he is equally un-forgetting of the bonds of friendship forged by his ancestors. In inheriting the double-handled cup received by Bellerophon, Diomedes affirms that he has also bound himself to Oeneus' family:

*'Therefore I am your friend and  
host in the heart of Argos;  
you are mine in Lykia, when I  
come to your country.  
Let us avoid each other's spears,  
even in the close fighting.  
There are plenty of Trojans and  
famed companions in battle for me  
to kill, whom the god sends me, or  
those I run down with my swift  
feet,  
many Achaeans for you to slough-  
ter, if you can do it.  
But let us exchange our armour, so  
that these others may know  
how we claim to be guests and  
friends from the days of our  
fathers.'*

Amidst the carnage of the Trojan War, the poet presents us with what appears to be a quite incredible display of civility. Men might be willing to kill to defend the

honour of their people, but they are also willing to lay aside their allegiances in order to safeguard friendship ties that cross battle lines. Just as quickly as the poet wins our affection with this *ad hoc* armistice, he dispels our hope as the episode serves to remind us of what instigated the conflict between Trojans and Achaeans.

Paris came to Menelaus' palace as a foreigner in a foreign land seeking protection and was extended hospitality as a guest-friend of noble birth and high station. Rather than honouring and reciprocating the generosity that was extended to him, Paris left Sparta with his host's wife. The Greek effort to return Helen and preserve the honour of the Achaeans was also an attempt to restore the sanctity of hospitality that had been violated by Paris. Unlike his fellow Trojan, Glaucus honours the tradition of guest-friendship and participates in a ritualized exchange of armour with Diomedes as a means of reconstituting the relationship established by their ancestors.

### Exchanging blows

The poet suggests, however, that this ancient tradition has been undermined:

*So they spoke, and both springing  
down from behind their horses  
gripped each other's hands and  
exchanged the promise of friend-  
ship;  
but Zeus the son of Cronos stole  
away the wits of Glaucus  
who exchanged with Diomedes the  
son of Tydeus armour  
of gold for bronze, for nine oxen's  
worth the worth of a hundred.*

In the economic calculus of hospitality, a man increases his wealth by showering his guests with precious gifts and thus incurring the promise of reciprocation with gifts of even greater value in the future. Glaucus' exchange of the weapons fashioned from the more precious metal should have made him the victor in the game of gift giving; however, the poet reckons that Diomedes had bettered him by using the ploy of guest-friendship as a means of swindling him out of the more valuable weapons. Although it will be several hundred years before the introduction of a monetary economy into Greece, the poet anticipates market rationality in assaying each of the exchanged goods by comparison with a common measure. The calculus of the emerging economy now requires that one give less than one receives and the indissoluble tie of guest-friendship has transformed into the self-serving orientation of commercial relations.

Hephaestus depicts two cities on the shield of Achilles: one at war and one at

peace. We wage war, indeed, for the sake of peace. Warriors risk life and limb so that their people can enjoy music and dancing, festival and feast. Yet even amidst the calm and joy in which fighting has ceased, the divine craftsman reminds us of the inevitable unrest that erupts in the marketplace. And so as the heroic code of honour wanes and warriors become traders wrangling in the marketplace, conflict persists, though without its most brutal consequences. Diomedes fights with his wits rather than his fists. Who today would begrudge him for buying low and selling high? For slaying Glaucus without even striking a blow?

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